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Introduction. Contesting “The Archive,” Archives, and Thanatarchy

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The questions of search that animate this series cannot be adequately answered without also considering the issue of retrieval, nor can the question of the acquisition of knowledge be addressed without attending to the subject of its availability. Although so much of our day-to-day experience of twenty-first-century life seems conditioned by a continuous and often overwhelming virtual flow of information, scholars have long emphasized the material and infrastructural factors that enable such a state of affairs (e.g., Hayles 1999; Starosielski 2015; Hu 2015; Parks and Starosielski 2015). The authors in this volume make a similar contribution to our understanding of archives in an age in which near-instant access to information can encourage us to take these repositories of informational, mediatic, and physical artifacts for granted. Situated at the intersection of the material and immaterial, the institutional and the independent, and, most importantly, the theoretical and the practical, the essays collected here challenge our conception of archives as either transparent conduits for storage and retrieval or sites of hierarchical, top-down dissemination. In short, they contest both the philosophy of “the archive” and the implementation of really-existing archives as they have been heretofore conceived. In
this spirit, this introduction seeks not only to offer context for their interventions but make some of its own.

The central relationship of curated resources to research within academic disciplines has meant that archival practice and scholarship have long existed in a relationship of complex symbiosis. On the scholarly side, theoretical considerations of the archive have steadily gained currency within the academy since the end of the Second World War and, not coincidentally, the rise of digital technologies. Many thinkers (e.g., Huhtamo and Parikka 2011, 6–7; Foster et al. 2016, 319–231) connect these developments to the earlier rise of photography and its centering effects both as analyzed by Walter Benjamin (Benjamin 1969a) and specifically taken up in relation to archives by André Malraux, whose essay “Museum without Walls,” published shortly after the end of the war, noted that “an earlier generation thrived on Michelangelo; now we are given photographs of lesser masters, likewise of folk paintings and arts hitherto ignored . . . For while photography is bringing a profusion of masterpieces to the artists, these latter have been revising their notion of what it is that makes the masterpiece” (Malraux 1978, 17). Michel Foucault’s reconsideration of the conditions of knowledge production over the 1960s and 1970s, which led him to declare that “in that area where, in the past, history deciphered the traces left by men, it now deploys a mass of elements that have to be grouped, made relevant, placed in relation to one another to form totalities” (Foucault 2010, 7), is a high-water mark of poststructuralist intervention into archival theory, delineating precisely the kind of work that he would label archaeology. His *Archaeology of Knowledge* thus offers a historically and archivally centered complement to the broader, information-theory-inflected analyses of language, subjectivity, and culture put forth by his contemporaries in France. Subsequently, artist-theorist Allan Sekula would make his own intervention into the conceptualization of the archive, examining how not only photography but the statistical documentation and pseudoscientific analysis of bodily features were crucial to the establishment of nineteenth-century archives of
population control and management in order to argue that “every proper portrait has its lurking, objectifying inverse in the files of the police” (Sekula 1986, 7).

The eruption of digital media into the popular consciousness beginning in the late 1980s and early 1990s and reaching a fever pitch with the mainstream adoption of the Internet a few years later has effected a reconsideration of these earlier treatments in light of the vast global changes in the production, storage, and consumption of knowledge precipitated by this technological shift. Although precedents exist, particularly in cinema studies, the paradiscipline of media archaeology, which examines the historical development of media technologies, especially through unrealized directions or prototypical stages from which they could have proceeded but did not, has risen in parallel with the homogenizing effect of this digital turn. This attention to the specificities of archaic media technologies and formats results, at least in part, from the way that computation renders previously distinct media forms and technologies equivalent via binary encoding and accessible through global networks of on-demand transmission and reception. In the mid-1980s, these imminent developments led one of the most preeminent forerunners of media archaeology, Friedrich Kittler—himself intimately familiar with the connections between poststructuralist thought and digital technologies—to remark of Foucault that “even writing itself, before it ends up in libraries, is a communication medium, the technology of which the archaeologist simply forgot. It is for this reason that all his analyses end immediately before that point in time at which other media penetrated the library’s stacks. Discourse analysis cannot be applied to sound archives or towers of film rolls” (Kittler 1999, 5). Kittler’s own reconsideration of these three mediatic forms in anticipation of their collapse into the multimedia PC would be followed by the ruminations of another poststructuralist philosopher, Jacques Derrida, on the cultural significance of telecommunications, and electronic mail in particular, in a 1994 lecture subsequently published in English under the title Archive Fever. There, he argued that “the technical structure of the
archiving archive also determines the structure of the archivable content even in its very coming into existence and in its relationship to the future” (Derrida 1996, 17). Such a conception of the technological conditioning of archives is pushed to a point of inversion by media archaeologist Wolfgang Ernst, who has suggested that the ostensibly universal structuration that digitally networked multimedia represents results in “an anarchive of sensory data for which no genuine archival culture has been developed so far in the occident” (Ernst 2013, 139; see also Reynolds 2011b, 27).

These shifts in the scholarly approach to archives have at times anticipated, and at others responded to, changes in archival practice itself. As the notion of archives and archivable materials has expanded, there has been a corresponding emphasis on acknowledging the perspectives of archivists and the labor of archiving itself. The digital humanities has been a key driver of this shift. For example, in reflecting on her work at the Women Writers Project, Julia Flanders reminds us that “for every hour of scholarly research in an office or library, countless other hours are spent building and maintaining the vast research apparatus of books, databases, libraries, servers, networks, cataloguing and metadata standards, thesauri, and systems of access” (Flanders 2012, 306). As noted by Rick Prelinger in this volume, this frequently overlooked work is often disproportionately undertaken by women and/or people of color, a fact emphasized by analyses like Leah Henrickson’s consideration of hands inadvertently captured performing the labor of scanning books for Google’s searchable archive of the printed word (Henrickson 2014), even while the results of automated search queries themselves are often biased against these very same subject positions (Olofsson 2015; Noble 2018). In this sense, appeals such as Miriam Posner’s for “ripping apart and rebuilding the machinery of the archive and database so that it does not reproduce the logic that got us here in the first place” (Posner 2016, 35) can be understood as doing for the software routines and metadata schemas of digital curation what media-archaeological approaches have promised to do for hardware.
More recently, scholars and archivists alike, not to mention those occupying the increasing number of syntheses between these roles, have arrived at a shared understanding that has, in truth, been with us the entire time, namely that “immaterial,” digital and material, physical media alike remain of archival interest—a realization following what Florian Cramer has more generally described as “the post-digital condition” (Cramer 2014)—and, as such, demand accounting for in both their particularity and generality. It is under these circumstances that the authors in this volume, as both practitioners and theorists of archives both digital and analog, offer their contributions, for the current state of affairs has also effected if not a reconciliation between then at least an amalgam of archival theory and praxis. The three other contributors to this volume all have experience curating and administering archives as well as in thinking through the implications of these practices, as do I, to a lesser extent, as a former systems administrator, student employee of my undergraduate institution’s library, and volunteer working for many years in and alongside its radio station’s music library, and presently as a media scholar. Moreover, many of the archives in question, from the library Prelinger runs together with his partner Megan, the Internet Archive on whose board he sits, and the Prelinger Archives whose audiovisual holdings he curates to the free online Public Library administered by Marcell Mars and Tomislav Medak at https://www.memoryoftheworld.org/, and even the college radio library, exist outside of, if not in opposition to, official structures for the accumulation, organization, and preservation of knowledge.

The Prelinger Library, for example, routinely takes in materials that other archives have either discarded or would never consider in the first place, while Public Library, as Mars noted in the keynote panel to the second Terms of Media conference, at Brown University, that forms the basis for this collection, has crucially preserved books from the former Yugoslavia that were purged from Croatian holdings in the wake of the collapse of state socialism in the early 1990s and the region’s subsequent ethnic warfare. Even the KALX
library contains key recordings documenting of the rise of punk rock, hip-hop, and electronic music in the San Francisco Bay Area and the anti-apartheid movement of the 1980s (to offer just two examples) that the University of California at Berkeley's music library has seemingly been content to overlook, albeit perhaps to the satisfaction of those who curate it (see Levine 2014). These unconventional archives, in other words, contest the status of an institutional archival practice that has often been relegated to playing catch-up in the wake of the Internet's popularization of search and retrieval even more than they do the prognostications of supposedly unpracticed theoreticians. If Google's absorption of the majority of the world's informational queries represents a totalizing expansion of knowledge retrieval under the privatizing conditions of neoliberalism, then unconventional archives contest this dominance by privileging a more eccentric curatorial touch.

These expanded archival practices can become contentious when they run up against the norms and structures erected to underwrite the dissemination of knowledge in the era of physical media—that is, in the age of the printed book, newspaper, magazine, and journal. Since the notion of informational ownership in the digital age essentially comes down to the ability to assert control over a stream of ones and zeroes (see, e.g., Kittler 1992, 85–6) within what is now a globally networked sphere of discursive production, this poses a threat to an older model that, as Mars and Medak argue, is built upon the governmental granting of corporate printing rights in early modern Europe. Their chapter therefore examines the implications of copyright law in relation to their Public Library project, which is situated here in opposition to a corporatized academic publishing industry dependent on unremunerated scholarly labor for its enviable profits. Charting the history of copyright in Western society through its inception to the present moment, they identify our current situation as a critical conjuncture for digital media, one in which tendencies toward the open exchange of information and the amalgamation of scholarly knowledge behind proprietary portals are at loggerheads. Building
on the theories of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, they argue that
the extreme privatization of academic productivity by scholarly
publishing conglomerates, combined with the ongoing proletari-
anization of the professoriate, who are often obliged to write and
edit without payment from precarious positions within and outside
the academy simply for a chance at landing secure employment,
have led to what they call “a schizoid impasse sustained by a failed
metaphor”: intellectual property. Public Library’s choice to offer
academic works regardless of these considerations, they argue,
expanding upon the philosophy of the late information activist
Aaron Swartz, who took his own life amidst a legal battle resulting
from his efforts to download a vast range of papers from scholarly
publishing clearinghouse JSTOR, is a political act that stands in
opposition to an exploitative and increasingly archaic legal regime,
offering another way forward for the preservation and dissemina-
tion of knowledge.

Prelinger’s essay, on the other hand, examines the contemporary
status of archives as material and theoretical constructs, the
tensions between these two facets that run through them, and
the contradictory, utopian possibilities that they can offer. Part
scholarly analysis, part professional anecdote, and part extension
of the conversations between archivists that circulate around the
clock with lightning speed via social media, Prelinger formulates
a theory and practice of archives—in explicit opposition to that
of “the archive”—that paradoxically situates their future(s) in the
inconveniences they present. From the labor of archivists to the po-
tentially hazardous materials that form the support for “old media,”
these disruptions in the smooth storage and retrieval of informa-
tion, materials, and media form the backdrop against which the
continuing production and reproduction of knowledge takes place.
Archives become loci of debate, where, as with media archaeology,
the past is kept, revisited, and reformulated with an eye toward
as-yet-unimaginable futures. For Prelinger, the Internet amplifies
and extends this process, but should not do so at the expense
of physical artifacts, which are at risk, he argues, of something
“akin to urban gentrification” by the nonpresence of immaterial records. We can thus consider physical media themselves, and not simply in their more dangerous forms like nitrate film, as a kind of inconvenience for which archives are well suited. Yet he also argues that archives cannot become totalities—that they will have to deal with loss, as the historical record has in fact always done, but which, in our contemporary moment of supposedly seamless digital reproducibility, seems somehow unthinkably traumatic. They will also have to negotiate the fine line between preservation and surveillance as, for example, records and holdings in the era of pervasive metadata may reveal much more about their creators and users than they have in the past, as well as the relationships between amateur and professional archivists and institutional and noninstitutional archives in a society where, via the decreasing cost of digital storage capacity, archives, or “archives,” are made almost by default. It is ultimately difficulties like these, however, that, for Prelinger, enable archives as sites of contestation and possibility, and for which they must be preserved against the precarity-inducing drive toward convenience.

These essays reimagine the potentiality of archives at a time when institutional support for preserving physical collections is hard won and corporate interests are rapidly consolidating their control over the digital distribution of knowledge, situating them in opposition to these unsettling trends. Yet I want to conclude this overview with a broader provocation: what if archives themselves, and the focus on the past they necessarily embody, either cannot or can no longer be the staging grounds for the future that media archaeologists and archivists so often insist that they are? If Benjamin’s writing on photography is a point of departure for many postwar reflections on the changing nature of the archive, then it is a sentiment expressed in one of the last essays he ever wrote that forms the backdrop to much of the more recent emphasis on media archaeology, the archive, and archives alike: “The past carries with it a temporal index by which it is referred to redemption . . . Every image of the past that is not recognized by the present as one of
its own concerns threatens to disappear irretrievably” (Benjamin 1969b, 254–5). At our particular point in history, however, as the social significance of archives is continually championed, knowledge becomes increasingly digitized and accessible, analog media experience a resurgence of popular and intellectual interest, and mining rhetorical opponents’ social media feeds for compromising previous statements has become a staple of online argumentation, we are more likely to experience the past as inescapable and even damning than as precarious and latently redemptive. Under such circumstances, does it still make sense to valorize the omnivorous preservation of the past? Or should we perhaps instead counterpoise to Benjamin’s Marxism, which led him to declare that “only that historian will have the gift of fanning the spark of hope in the past who is firmly convinced that even the dead will not be safe from the enemy if he wins” (Benjamin 1969b, 255), Marx’s own well-known statement that “the tradition of all the dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brain of the living” (Marx 1963, 15)?

The introduction of Marxism into the question of archives is not arbitrary, for it is precisely at the intersection of these two modes of thought that some of the most penetrating analysis of recent years has been located. This critique has risen in large part out of popular music writing associated with the blogosphere, which is to say a sector that is intimately familiar with both unconventional archives—given that popular music, even at its most obscure, aesthetically innovative, and/or theoretical, has rarely been welcomed into institutional collections with the same vigor as books or even films—and the potentialities that the Internet can offer for the storage, retrieval, dissemination, and discussion of underrepresented media artifacts. It is thus all the more surprising, then, that it should be one that expresses exasperation with the conditions of stagnation that seem to accompany the increasing tendency toward archival totalization. The recently departed and already sorely missed Mark Fisher’s Capitalist Realism, for example, which analyzes the sociocultural effects of neoliberalism since the collapse of state-socialist alternatives to capitalism in the late
1980s and early 1990s, begins with a reading of Alfonso Cuarón's cinematic adaptation of P. D. James's novel *The Children of Men*, in which “cultural treasures—Michelangelo's *David*, Picasso's *Guernica*, Pink Floyd’s inflatable pig—are preserved in a building that is itself a refurbished heritage artifact . . . our only glimpse into the lives of the elite, holed up against the effects of a catastrophe which has caused mass sterility” (Fisher 2009, 1). While Fisher himself blogged under the name K-Punk, music critic and prolific blogger Simon Reynolds has also taken up this critique in his book *Retromania* to more explicitly examine the state of popular music in the twenty-first century thus far, made and experienced under conditions of previously inconceivable access to the styles of the past, writing that “the very people who you would once have expected to produce (as artists) or champion (as consumers) the non-traditional and the groundbreaking . . . they've switched roles to become curators and archivists. The avant-garde is now an arrière-garde” (Reynolds 2011b, xix–xx). These considerations draw upon earlier Marxist analyses, most notably those of Fredric Jameson and particularly his study of the pastiche-laden aesthetics of postmodernism (Jameson 1991), as well as the connection drawn by Derrida between what he calls “*le mal d'archive, archive fever*” and the recapitulatory urge of the psychoanalytic death drive, or Thanatos (Derrida 1996, 12; see also Reynolds 2011b, 26–8). While this skepticism of the drive to archive is gaining increasing purchase within the academy, it is notable that it is at the intersection of theoretically informed, crate-digging music writers and digital file-sharing networks that the preservationist impulse embodied in archives has birthed its most trenchant critics.

If the status of music collections as archives frequently curated outside of official spaces and organized by an intensely personal sense of significance has led some who collect and write about music to reflect upon the exhaustion of that significance post-Napster, however, their observations are of great import for any theory or practice of archives as they are more generally construed today. As Fisher writes,
We do not need to wait for *Children of Men*'s near-future to arrive to see this transformation of culture into museum pieces. The power of capitalist realism derives in part from the way that capitalism subsumes and consumes all of previous history: one effect of its “system of equivalence” which can assign all cultural objects . . . a monetary value. (Fisher 2009, 4)

Capitalism is far from the only system of general equivalence, but the Marxist analysis of the money form may represent the *ur*-model for understanding them more broadly:9 both the digital, in which all expressions are reduced to binary alternations, and the archive operate under similar principles.10 As Sekula notes of nineteenth-century attempts to establish a physiological typology of criminal tendencies, “it was only on the basis of mutual comparison, on the basis of the tentative construction of a larger, ‘universal’ archive, that zones of deviance and respectability could be clearly demarcated” (Sekula 1986, 14), yet this determining structural influence might not be the only effect of what he calls “the fundamental problem of the archive, the problem of volume” (29). In his publicization of information theorist Claude Shannon’s seminal paper on communication as a mathematical problem, Warren Weaver wrote that, as the transformation of messages irrespective of medium into discrete, statistically determinable units for which they both considered binary encoding exemplary, “one has the vague feeling that information and meaning may prove to be something like a pair of canonically conjugate variables in quantum theory, they being subject to some joint restriction that condemns a person to the sacrifice of the one as he insists on having much of the other” (Weaver 1998, 28).11 This suspicion lurks behind much of Reynolds’s thinking in *Retromania*, as when he writes that “it’s easy to imagine that as the collection’s size approaches infinity, the appetite to listen to music shrinks to infinitesimal” (Reynolds 2011b, 111). Whether within a realm of intellectual-property-free digital transmission or the inconvenient utopias of unorthodoxically curated physical spaces, archivists, scholars, and theorists will have to address the
suffocating effect of stockpiled history, and not just the breadth and organization of its collected artifacts, if archives are to remain much-needed sites of contestation against the current wave of global reaction, which threatens to erase the past not in order to move forward, but to repeat its abominations anew.

Notes
1 This section cited, written by Rosalind Krauss, focuses on the historical significance of Benjamin and Malraux, but see also Hal Foster's analysis of archival tendencies in contemporary art in Foster et al., 782–3.
2 For more on this latter set of developments, see Lison 2014.
3 See Huhtamo and Parikka 2011. Jussi Parikka, in an excellent and accessible introduction to the field, enumerates as precursors in film studies the proponents of so-called apparatus theory, Christian Metz, Jean-Louis Baudry, and Jean-Louis Comolli (key texts of whose are collected in Rosen 1986) alongside feminist film scholar Laura Mulvey (Mulvey 1975) and “the by-now classic 34th International Federation of Film Archives— FIAF, www.fiafnet.org— conference in Brighton in 1978” (Parikka 2012, 9).
4 Indeed, one of the most thought-provoking efforts to articulate the methods of the digital humanities and media archaeology together also lies, perhaps unsurprisingly, at the intersection of software and hardware in the attempt to develop media theorist Kara Keeling's concept of a queer operating system (Keeling 2014) into a set of technical specificities (Barnett et al. 2016).
5 Mars and Prelinger's talks can be viewed together at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kvzuUgP6d3Q; the collection in question can be accessed at https://otpisane.memoryoftheworld.org/.
6 For more on this development see, e.g., Reynolds 2011b, discussed further below.
7 It is presumably due to views like these that Erkki Huhtamo and Parikka describe Benjamin as “arguably the most prominent forerunner— beside Foucault— of media-archaeological modes of cultural analysis” (Huhtamo and Parikka 2011, 6). Simon Reynolds has similarly written that “Benjamin and Borges are the avatars of our ‘time out of joint’ era” (Reynolds 2011a, 34).
8 See, for example, literary and theatre scholar Emma Smith's talk at The Oxford Research Centre in the Humanities 2016 colloquium “What Does It Mean to Be Human in the Digital Age?”, viewable at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Eq51l1XyDmQ.
9 Although he does not go quite this far, on this theme see Parikka 2012, 36–7. Readers will also be interested in Jens Schröter's talk at the first Terms of Media conference, in Lüneburg, Germany, entitled “Money Determines Our Situation” and viewable at https://vimeo.com/133636177, as well as the written version
published as part of the corresponding volume in the present series (Beverungen et al. 2019). Since in Marxism, arguably more than anywhere else, time is money, Flanders's consideration of the corporatized academy's insistence on the general equivalency of project time for nonfaculty work (which would of course include archival labor) is also relevant (Flanders 2012, 303–6).

On this latter point, see Sekula's conception of the photographic archive as “a relation of general equivalence between images,” which, in its “capacity . . . to reduce all possible sights to a single code of equivalence was grounded . . . in the universal abstract language of mathematics” and measurement (Sekula 1986, 17), in advance of “an operationalist model of knowledge, based on the ‘general equivalence’ established by the numerical shorthand code” (57). It is of course now difficult in retrospect not to understand this shorthand as a forerunner to binary, digital encoding, especially since Sekula himself even connects it with the contemporaneous technology of the telegraph (33). See also Krauss's observations on photography more widely, building on Benjamin and Malraux, in Foster et al. 2016, 320–2, as well as Parikka 2012, 37 on all of the above.

For more on this development and its broader implications, see Hayles 1999, Terranova 2004, 6–38, and Lison 2014.

References


